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THE COMMONWEALTH OF ART

A LECTURE DELIVERED BY

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In 1945 the Library of Congress received a bequest from the late Mrs. Bertha L. Elson, widow of Louis Charles Elson, to provide lectures on music and musical literature in memory of her husband. Professor Sachs's lecture was one of the series made possible by Mrs. Elson's bequest which also supplied funds for this publication.

THE COMMONWEALTH OF ART

AESTHETICS is defined by Webster as "the branch of philosophy dealing with the beautiful"; by the Oxford Dictionary as "belonging to the appreciation of the beautiful"; by the American College Dictionary as "the science which deduces from nature and taste the rules and principles of art." Or else, we might simply call it an attitude towards art, based on knowledge and orderly thinking.

However we define it, there is something tragic about aesthetics. However we define it, we expect this discipline to trace the hidden laws under which the ever-present and ever-changing conditions of man create an ever-new art. And we hope for a unified conception from on high, in which all styles and even all individual masters would appear as different but necessary parts of a meaningful and well-organized whole.

Alas, we hope in vain. So far, the systems of aesthetical thinking, from the times of Confucius and Plato down to the twentieth century, have been disconcertingly controversial. They disapprove of at least a good half of all the works that art has created to this day, on the ground that these works disagree with the principles of good and sterling art. For they gauge art by uniform standards; against what they pretend, they build their theories on the drifting quicksand of their own tastes, conditioned as the tastes are by their personalities, generations, surroundings, nationalities, and even outright political opinions—much as are the artists of whom they speak.

Such an attitude is normative; it gives laws where it should find them and would be extremely dangerous in its narrow-minded arrogance, were it not that the creative artist does what he is compelled to do and laughs at the self-styled Solon.

An esthetic approach that shies from being normative must of necessity draw its conclusions, less from the author's experience, taste, and subsequent thinking than from the facts provided by thousands of years of art creation. This does not mean that the philosopher should yield to the historian. It rather implies that aesthetics should come from the fusion of philosophical and historical thinking. The philosopher must learn to forget about his individual taste and experience and realize that, on the contrary, the decisive fact is the overwhelming variety of tastes, from the Older Stone Age to our present day, documented in the innumerable works that the historian has uncovered and interpreted.

In preparing such a fusion of thought, I speak of the Commonwealth of Art, not of just one individual art.¹

This title is not meant to cover the many doubtful attempts at combining different arts in a common effort. It also shall not cover the doubtful cooperation of several arts, such as playing phonograph records in museums as an additional auditive stimulus to visitors prepared for visual experiences; or such as, the other way around, offering impressive murals as an additional stimulus to musical audiences. Nor shall it cover the just as doubtful or at best quite personal transfers from art to art that we know as color hearing and vowel seeing and that psychology describes as synesthesias.

The Commonwealth of Art is rather meant as a problem of history: as a discussion of whether, why, and how the individual histories of painting, music, sculpting, poetry, dancing, and building, when put above each other, are almost congruent, progressing to the left and the right and forwards and backwards with their sister arts. And it is also meant as a problem of philosophy: as a discussion why, beyond the appeal

¹ Curt Sachs, *The Commonwealth of Art*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1946.

to different senses, the various arts meet in a common spirit which does not unveil itself completely unless we treat the arts as one.

Such discussions rest necessarily on a comparison of the histories of various arts, indeed, of the arts themselves. Is such comparison admissible, and if so, is it possible? Is there a common factor and *tertium comparationis* in creations as different as a church building, a symphony, a stage performance, a dance, a novel, a landscape painting? Would not any such comparison of necessity be superficial, arbitrary, or at best metaphorical?

This it would be indeed unless the comparer went back to the one elementary fact: that the psychophysical complex that we call art has incomparable as well as comparable components. In the main, the work of art has three components: its meaning—emotional or otherwise—is one; the material, with its specific conditions, is another; and the third is the technical act that conveys meaning to matter.

Two of these components—material and working technics—are the individual and exclusive property of only one of the arts: the architect creates in stone and steel, the musician in tones, the dancer in his body, the poet in words, the painter in colors. And he who wants to compare can certainly not straightway cross from bricks to words or gestures, to colors or tones. But the meaning and soul that the artist infuses into his work are beyond technique and material, beyond all writing, carving, and building, beyond melodic intervals, verse meters, and tints. It is an eloquent message from man to man and has therefore its law in man himself—in man as he feels and is at a certain moment of history and in a certain social or national habitat. Much in the same way as our gestures, words, and eyes unite in expressing the same emotion of our self, to whatever different fields of physiology they may belong, the arts reflect man's will and reaction however different

they may appear to the senses. And since they emanate from the same center, they can, indeed they must, be compared.

Emerson's *Essay on History*² says in a similar spirit: "To the senses what more unlike than an ode of Pindar, a marble Centaur, the Peristyle of the Parthenon and the last actions of Phocion? Yet do these various external expressions proceed from one national mind. . . . What is to be inferred from these facts but this: that in a certain state of thought is the common origin of very diverse works? It is the spirit and not the fact that is identical. . . . The roots of all things are in man."

It should be understood, however, that the "expression" in art that Emerson mentions and that I myself refer to, is never spontaneous; the master who paints a nightmare does not shake while he is doing so, nor does the composer of a funeral march lament and cry. Art shapes emotions only after a long process of filtering and sublimation.

The medium that filters and sublimates might be described as the artist's personal, national, or generational attitude.

Artists' attitudes, ever different and ever changing, dodge definition and neat classification. They are as motley, manifold, inscrutable as man himself. Still, there is a rather reliable method that grants a rough orientation. It consists in describing the extremes of attitude on either side or, to put it in a simile, in establishing both the freezing and the boiling point in order to gauge the numberless shades of temperature somewhere between them at their proper places. It would not be a bad idea to catch at this simile and call the two extremes in artists' attitudes "cold" and "hot" instead of using one of those philosophical terminologies which ask for a long winded explanation (like "classical" and "nonclassical" or even my own dualism "ethos" and "pathos").

But even terms as comparatively unequivocal as "cold" and "hot" can hardly be defined beyond mistake and uncertainty. Instead of trying to define them, we had better study the scope

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays*, New York, A. L. Burt, s. a., pp. 12-14.

of cold and warmer attitudes and the different qualities that they impart to style.

Hot artists stress emotion, passion, frenzy, ecstasy, while colder masters hate the display of emotion and ignore or temper down all vehement passion. Not long before 400 B. C., Socrates marked the end of such a frigid age when he forced some sculptors in Athens to admit that statues, as the effigies of living humans, ought after all to show a few of the emotions that every human face betrays. It marked the beginning of another hot age when, around 1600, an Italian coined a novel word, *lo stile rappresentativo*, to label an unprecedented musical language that depicted deepest feeling and made the audiences cry from compassion and sadness.

Either one, the cold as well as the hot attitude entail a number of qualities, which confront their opposites in a similar dualism.

On the colder side, the human approach is more reserved and the artist withdraws from personal expression. He himself does not wish to impose his dreams and sufferings upon the beholder; and he also refrains from rendering himself to the personal, individual concerns of his models. In this attitude, he might go all the way to the frigidity of the soulless gods of the Periclean age.

Such flight from the unique and the personal must lead on the cooler side to the interest in types, that is in abstractions which emphasize restful permanence against the ever-changing uniqueness of the merely personal. One finds the examples in the one thousand years of Doric temples, in the immutable patterns of the *commedia dell'arte*, or in the depersonalized Lutheran chorale.

In the strife for types and permanence, the cooler artists drop not only the personal, but also the accidental. They stick to all traits immanent and inherent, which must not be changed by anything derived from without, not by atmospheric conditions or light and shadow, and not even by man's age:

Periclean statues show ageless gods; and the Oriental painter refuses to bestow shadows on his figures.

One consequence is that the cooler artist, more than the hotter one, desires beauty. I hesitate to use the word, because it is entirely beyond definition and so hopelessly worn out that it hardly stands any serious handling. And yet we must confront the trend that it covers, the trend to eliminating all individual flaws until the type is pure in its perfection. It seems to be this perfection that the senses perceive as beauty.

Perfection of the typical is achieved by an art that we call idealistic. It is an act of idealism when the painter Lomazzo demands in 1584 "that portraits should exalt the dignity and greatness of their models and suppress the natural imperfections of their subjects." It is idealism when Jacques-Louis David, the leading French painter around 1800, exclaims: "What matters truth if the poses are noble?"

I hardly need emphasize that the element of form in its own right has an overwhelming importance in the strife for types, objective aloofness, and all-valid laws. These laws are so much more all-valid as they have their roots in mathematical ratios. Thus Christopher Wren, the builder of St. Paul's in London, could say that in art "always the true test is natural or geometrical beauty"; the painter Charles Lebrun, chief decorator of the palace of Versailles, demanded that painting "be founded upon a demonstrable science," namely, geometry; and Father Mersenne, the greatest musicologist of the seventeenth century, who distrusted imagination, sensuous perception, and any judgment based on them, averred again and again that music was a mere part of mathematics.

Turning to the other, hot extreme of our scale, we see the impersonal replaced by a personal attitude. The artist makes common cause with his models. He represents himself, as Berlioz did when he wrote his *Symphonie phantastique* to in-

roduce his audience to the torments and the obsessing *idée fixe* that he suffered from an as yet unrequited love for an English actress. Or else, the artist yields himself to his models, as Wagner did when he cried because at the end of "Lohengrin" Elsa had to die.

In so emotional, personal an attitude, the artist is much more interested in the individual than in the typical, in the unique than in the permanent, and hence in moving, transitory stages rather than in frozen statics. Under this impact, a "warm" portrait reflects not only a definite person instead of just a god or a king, but also a person at a definite age, indeed, at a definite moment and in a definite mood under definite atmospheric conditions. A phenomenon like shadow is no longer accidental but on the contrary essential. In the Baroque, even a building is meant to get additional life from the ever-changing shadows that mould its outlines and surfaces and stress the suggestion of three-dimensional space.

What these masters produce can be extremely beautiful. But their beauty is not the kind that stems from the elimination of individual flaws and the perfection of typical patterns. And it is a beauty ruthlessly sacrificed when it threatens convincing truth. As Hogarth said: "Were I to paint the character of Charon, I would thus distinguish his make from that of a common man's; and in spite of the word low, venture to give him a broad pair of shoulders, and spindle shanks, whether I had the authority of an ancient statue, or basso relievo, for it or not."

To the idealists or, as Hogarth called them, the nature menders, he opposed a strict naturalism. Nature-mending, to him and to his fellow-naturalists in every country and century, is untrue, is a lie; its patterns are soulless, and so is its very beauty; and the thing "in itself" that Plato and Kant exalt is nonexistent. Man cannot live or be understood without his proper environment, be it factual or spiritual. He cannot live and must not be depicted without the three-dimensional space

in which he breathes and moves. Nor, the naturalistic poets add, does he live outside the social situation that conditions his thoughts and his actions. Let it be ugly, evil, malodorous—at least it is true; and honest truth is better than mendacious beauty.

Structure, though never absent, plays a minor role in such an attitude. The artist of the hotter camp resents the emphasis on form as an interference with the illusion of life. For nature hardly ever arranges its creations in geometrical patterns. To him, all obtrusive form seems intentional, artificial, and untrue, delaying all movement and destroying the informality of nature. The Frenchman Noverre, one of the greatest ballet masters of all time, wrote in 1760 against the conventional choreographers and scolded them for clinging to strictly symmetrical arrays which would never allow five nymphs on the right and seven on the left side. "But," he asks, "was not the result cold exercise instead of spirited action?" And in this sentence we have the direct connection of the concept of symmetrical form with our very word cold.

It must be understood that this manifold dualism is chiefly a matter of method to deepen our insight and to guide our judgment. It does not imply that all the qualities on the left and the right of the versus sign must necessarily meet in every single work of art. This is not, and never will be, the case. The hotter phase of the high Renaissance, for instance, can hardly be called naturalistic, and architecture will even in naturalistic periods seldom swerve from static symmetry. This is the reason why no two styles are ever identical, even if they move in the same direction. And it also explains why, as a rule, no style is actually just cold or hot: by far the majority of styles live somewhere between the extremes, in regions that we might classify as cool or tepid or warm.

But even so modified a conception of style, though indispensable for methodical purposes, can be dangerous from the viewpoint of historical evaluation. It still suggests that in a certain period all works of art be shaped in the same spirit and in similar forms, and that they reach a new style with different forms and a different spirit through a "transitional" style. This is not tenable. There are no transitional styles, for the very simple reason that there are no lasting styles either. Every style moves on, develops, waxes, fades, and differs today from what it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. Therefore, we should insist that a style is not cool or hot, but moves in a cool or a hot direction.

This continuous flow, however, should not be seen as a straight forward-movement like that of a steamship at sea, but rather like the consistent, purposeful zigzag-veering that we know as the course of a sailboat. Art—every art—moves alternately to the warmer and to the cooler side; it changes direction when coolness threatens to stiffen in academic frigidity, and again when warmth threatens to dissolve all art in an overheated chaos. Did we not quite recently, in the 1920's, witness such sudden veering in all the arts from a noisy naturalism and expressionism to a somewhat coolish neoclassicism, with an overemphasis on craft and form and an underemphasis on emotion?

In those centuries of western history which our eye encompasses, one such phase lasts roughly a generation or a third of a century, seldom less, but sometime more. For this reason I speak of "generational reversals." It should be understood, however, that this does not imply that a man's whole style is determined by the date of his birth. The year in which he is born determines his first style only; the second and third of the customary three styles that critical analysis grants the great masters are unmistakably the styles of further generations; unwittingly, the masters obey rather than command; they obey, not the example of younger men, but the mysterious trends of changing times.

Veering from one direction to the opposite direction in the span of approximately a third of a century cannot account for the whole complicated course that art has steered in the four or more thousand years spread out before our eyes. The mere existence of style-concepts as generally accepted as Hellenistic, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque proves that periods much longer than a third of a century and even longer than a full hundred years can have a character decisively different from those of the centuries before and after. All of them show the imprints of alternatively cooler and hotter generations: the Renaissance, to mention one, forces before our eyes the alternation of a still, serene beginning down to the 1460's, the restless, emotional, dramatic end of the century, the classicistic reaction of the early sixteenth with Raphael at the helm, and the hotter middle of the century with Michelangelo as the representative power.

But is there not a similar alternation from style to style above the generational reversals? Indeed: Hellenism with the stress on Corinthian elegance, on movement, on passion is hotter than the preceding style of Greece; Flamboyant Gothic with the violence of its anti-harmonic surge upward, the all-side projection of its parts and particles, and the redundant profusion of its decorative details, is hotter than the thirteenth century; Baroque is hotter than the Renaissance, both in its popular concept of unbalanced exaggeration and in its actual facets, in naturalism, integration, and dramatic conception. This twofold alternation, in generational reversals as well as in larger style periods, can perhaps be grasped in a simile: we undergo a ceaseless alternation of warmer days and cooler nights, but also, in a much wider span, a ceaseless alternation of warmer summers and cooler winters. And as a rule, a cool summer night is still essentially warmer than a winter day, though nights are supposed to be cooler than days. This would explain or at least make acceptable that the cooler phase in a generational reversal is often warmer than the hotter phases in some other, basically colder style.

It even seems that we must visualize the existence of still larger cycles superimposed on these styles, indeed that every two of them are the phases cold and hot of some bigger cycle. Romanesque and Gothic unite in the complex of the High Middle Ages; Renaissance and Baroque join in what—as a makeshift—I dare to call the Greater Renaissance; the subsequent shorter periods, the Sentimental Age and Storm and Stress, Classicism and Romanticism, Naturalism and Impressionism, are all inseparable and join in what I called the Greater Romanticism. Again, the Greater Romanticism and the Greater Renaissance stand as the “Later Ages” strictly against the Middle Ages. They are characterized by an outspoken individualism and the three-dimensional concepts of perspective (in the visual arts) and chordal harmony (in music), where the Middle Ages had been collectivistic and basically two-dimensional. And what we witness today is not evolution, but very definitely a revolution, a ruthless breaking away from every trend and goal of the Later Ages between the early Renaissance and the dying Romanticism.

All the arts share in these reversals, styles, and cycles. None of them actually lags behind the others: Gothic music is coincident in time with Gothic architecture, and Baroque poetry coincides with Baroque painting. But there is clearly a different accent on the various arts in different phases of a style. Even without the impacts of general trends, the arts have different natural temperatures.

Building is by nature cooler than music: it is so impersonal that nonprofessionals are hardly interested in the names of architects; Chartres cathedral rests as anonymous as Rockefeller Center. Architecture is moored in the soil, therefore preponderantly static, and in its stationary nature more than any other art structural and even symmetrical; it is meant to serve innumerable generations with ever-changing tastes; and though it can convey emotion, it is but slightly emotional in itself.

Music appears to be in a quite different situation: it is so personal that music lovers are interested in biography much more than we historians like them to be. Progressing in time it is basically dynamic; it is emotional almost by definition; and no other art would tolerate forms as free as the phantasy, the rhapsody, and the toccata.

Sculpture has its place not far from architecture; even the most dynamic masters, like Michelangelo and Rodin, pay a heavy tribute to its static, statuesque laws. Painting and poetry keep to the side of music: the painters are free to snare transitory phases of motion and to describe the momentary appearance of objects under the impact of shadow, light, and air. Epic and dramatic poetry rely on action, change, development; and lyrical verses compete with music and pictures in catching the delicate shades of the soul. And both the arts of painting and poesy are almost as emotional as music is.

As a consequence of such difference in natural temperature, it is only logical that every art has a different reaction to impulses from either the cold or the hot side. A cold art would still be cool when the temperature goes up, and a hot art would still be warm when the wind blows icy.

But even this is not yet the whole truth. History shows that, like flowers and animals, the cooler arts thrive best in cooler periods, and the warmer arts, in warmer periods. We have quite a few weighty examples at hand. The best known is the history of the arts in the nineteenth century. The climate of romanticism, naturalism, impressionism was very, very warm. Consequently, it provided a rarely paralleled galaxy of great and greatest composers, painters, poets—from Beethoven to Debussy, from Turner to Hodler, from Goethe to Ibsen. But architecture was wintering. Instead of creating styles of its own, it lapsed from a Roman Revival into a Greek Revival, from a Gothic Revival into a Renaissance Revival, and finally into the unspeakable depravation that the English call Edwardian, the Germans Wilhelminian, and the French *le style Emile Loubet*.

A parallel example is the powerful climax of the Middle Ages in the fourteenth century. The musicians find in it an unprecedented bloom of composition with entirely novel ideas, sounds, and techniques and with epochal masters of the size of Philippe de Vitry, Machault, and Landino. Literature had its heyday with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio; with Juan Ruiz and Eustache Deschamps; with Gower and Chaucer. And the painters boast of Giotto's novel naturalism, the Sienese lyricism, and the youthful loveliness of Wilhelm of Cologne. But architecture fails us; the builders led to the last, exaggerated phase of the Gothic style, which the French have called Flamboyant, and the English, Perpendicular. They present us with evolution, not, as the painters and poets, with full-fledged revolution.

Quite similar was the situation in ancient Greece from Alexander's century to the Roman conquest.

The other way around, one should mention the curious case of the Renaissance in Italy. Around 1425, the new movement started with Brunelleschi's buildings in Florence and led into the Baroque in the days of Palladio and Vignola. In between, we find architectural geniuses of the size of Alberti, Bramante, and Michelangelo: architecture was the leading art despite the eminent work of sculptors and painters. And it led Italian art so far into the cooler regions of expression that the country was unable to produce any musician of note: during a full hundred and fifty years, it imported composers from the north, from Burgundy, Flanders, Brabant, and Holland. Not before the 1560's did Italian musicians emerge and terminate the world domination of the Netherlands.

Our three examples come from different kinds of phases. Two are hot: the nineteenth and the fourteenth century. They conclude two large cycles, the Later and the Middle Ages. One is cooler: the fifteenth century. It introduces the Renaissance and, with the Renaissance, the whole cycle of the Later Ages. And there seems a further law of evolution to consider.

This law would be well illustrated by the art of children (though any reference to their behavior is not altogether flawless in historical research). What our boys and girls endeavor to draw is inspired by knowledge rather than by visual perception of things. They outline sums of details, not integrated wholes—a head on a neck on a torso on two legs on two feet, but not a unified, organic man as he appears to the eyes; or trees and a stream and a house and a little dog, but not an actual landscape. The man they draw would at best be “being,” but neither acting nor feeling; the sun, a circle with radiating beams around it, might perch in the sky; but it would not light the scene or make the objects cast their shadows. Children’s art is on the side of essence, station, coolness. Only later do we learn to observe, to draw what we actually see, and to become interested in appearance, coherence, action, emotion.

In a similar way, it seems to be a common law that styles and larger cycles begin with a cooler phase. The archaic styles of Sumer, Egypt, Greece, and the Middle Ages are cool, insulating, stationary, and hence preponderantly architectural. There is little in the other arts to match the pyramids of Gizeh, the Doric temple, and the cathedral of Pisa. But aged, matured civilizations differ: the colorful art of the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty is warm, dynamic, attempting at group formation, and preponderantly pictorial (we do not know about their music); the late Minoan in Crete is similar; and the same is true of later Grecian art.

And therewith, it seems, we have found a final law: all styles and cycles, whatever their lengths, develop from static to dynamic goals, from coolness to warmth, from essence to appearance, from the lead of architecture to the lead of music.

Here are a few of the aesthetical facts that the history of art discloses. I shall not try to derive their lawful and consistent rhythm from politics, social conditions, biological changes in man, or whatever the causality fiends hold in readiness. We have yet no insight into the hidden forces that control the march of art.

But though we do not know these forces, we know that the march of art is a steady alternation of opposite trends, comparable to our own marching in steady alternation of the left and the right foot and in a continual shift of balance. Whoever takes sides in this regular alternation confuses the issue. Only those who see that the right foot has the same duties and rights as the left foot can hope to understand the life of art.

The people we do not know best, we know that the
nature of our political situation is opposite to that of
the rest of the world. In every other country of the world
the right hand is in a constant state of balance. It is
only in our case that the right hand is in a constant state
of imbalance. Only in our case that the right hand is in a constant
state of imbalance. Only in our case that the right hand is in a constant
state of imbalance.

